

Documents on Diplomacy: Resources

Biography of William Henry Seward

Introduction

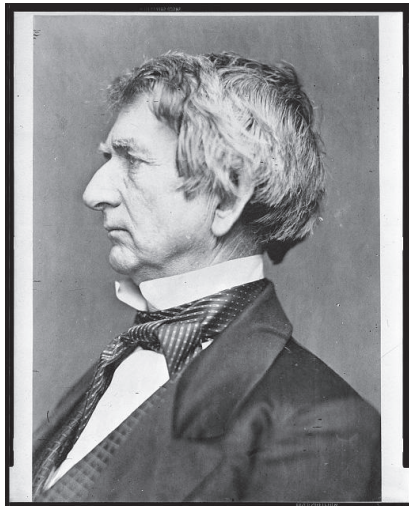
William Henry Seward was appointed Secretary of State by Abraham Lincoln on March 5, 1861, and served until March 4, 1869. Seward carefully managed international affairs during the Civil War, and also negotiated the 1867 purchase of Alaska.

Rise to Prominence

Seward was born in Florida, New York, on May 16, 1801. He graduated from Union College in Schenectady, New York in 1820.

In 1830, he won a seat in the state senate, and served as governor from 1838 to 1840. In 1849, Seward was elected to the U.S. Senate, where he became a leading antislavery politician. Seward was the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination in 1860, but his anti-slavery speeches caused some party members to view him as too radical to win over swing voters in critical states. The party instead settled on the more moderate Abraham Lincoln, whose victory in the general election precipitated the secession of the South and formation of the Confederate States of America. Seward became involved in negotiations between Northern and Southern political leaders to resolve the crisis, while also privately accepting Lincoln's offer to be Secretary of State in the incoming administration on December 28, 1860. Influence on American Diplomacy Along with other political leaders, Seward negotiated unsuccessfully to resolve the secession crisis during the winter of 1861. Once in Lincoln's Cabinet, Seward anticipated that he would wield a strong influence over foreign policy. However, he underestimated Lincoln's interest in foreign affairs.

Although Seward was willing to consider war against European powers



should they prove too friendly toward the Confederacy, Lincoln overruled Seward on this point. Seward thus focused most of his efforts on preventing foreign recognition of the Confederacy.

Seward sent U.S. agents to Europe to publicly lobby for the Union cause, but early in his tenure a diplomatic crisis arose when the U.S. Navy arrested Confederate envoys headed for Europe. Despite U.S. public support in favor of their detention, Seward agreed to release the envoys to avoid the threat of war with Great Britain.

Seward also faced difficulties in encouraging foreign governments to curtail the smuggling of goods and war materiel, as well as the construction of Confederate warships. Seward worked with the U.S. Minister in London, Charles Francis Adams, to put an end to the building of these ships. The British Government failed to prevent the launch of the CSS *Alabama* and the CSS *Florida*, but the subsequent embarrassment caused officials to more strictly enforce British neutrality, and prevented the building of further Confederate ships on British soil.

After the Civil War ended with a Union victory, Seward pursued negotiations to expand U.S. Territory. He resumed discussions to purchase Russian Alaska, resulting in the 1867 Alaska Purchase. Seward also attempted, unsuccessfully, to acquire territory elsewhere, as negotiations to acquire the Virgin Islands, part of the Dominican Republic, as well as several other small islands in the Caribbean failed. However, the United States Navy occupied Midway Atoll in 1867. Seward also involved the United States in Mexican affairs from 1865 to 1867, by supporting the anti-French forces in defeating Austrian archduke Maximilian whom the French had installed as Emperor of Mexico in 1862.

Seward continued to serve as Secretary of State under Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, but as a Republican moderate, Seward found himself at odds with Johnson and other conservatives in the Cabinet, while radicals in Congress distrusted him for his continued loyalty to Johnson. Despite Congressional hostility toward Seward, Congress still approved the purchase of Alaska.

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<http://history.state.gov/departments/history/people/seward-william-henry>